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Putin Greenlights Prison Phone Jamming to Combat Scams

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The law's authors say that convicts use contraband cellphones to commit fraud, witness intimidation and more. **Yevgeny Yepanchintsev / TASS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin has signed legislation Wednesday allowing phone companies to jam communication in prisons in order to prevent scams.

The legislation's authors say that convicts use contraband cellphones to commit fraud and witness intimidation as well as control the actions of fugitive members of criminal organizations.

Under the newly signed amendments to Russia's criminal and communications laws, Russia's Federal Prison Service can now send phone companies a written request to jam specific phone numbers.

An explanatory note to the bill said authorities had seized more than 56,000 contraband phones and detained over 5,000 suspects across Russian penal colonies and pre-trial detention centers in 2018 alone.

A major bank had tallied some 280 fraudulent prison call centers that year, the Vedomosti business daily reported that year. The Interior Ministry had earlier said one-third of 38,000 cellphone crimes were committed by prisoners, according to the RBC news website.

Russia's Central Bank estimates that Russians lost 6.5 billion rubles ($87.70) to fraud in the first nine months of 2020.

Security experts note an uptick in phone scams, as well as phishing and social engineering attacks this year due to coronavirus-related remote work and "simple but effective" methods of fraudulently soliciting payments.

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